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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/20/2017
TAGS: CU PGOV PHUM PINR PREL
SUBJECT: POLICE BREAK UP SIT DOWN STRIKE BY LADIES IN WHITE

Classified By: COM: Michael E. Parmly : For reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: Beginning at about 6:30 AM on April 21, ten members of the Cuban human rights organization, Ladies in White (Damas de Blanco), held a sit down protest in a small park close to Havana's Revolution Square. The Damas demanded the unconditional release of the 55 political prisoners who have been incarcerated since the massive crackdown on pro-democracy activists in 2003. After three hours, an officer from the Ministry of the Interior told the Damas to disperse. When they refused, police picked them up from the ground and shoved them into a bus. All participants in the protest were driven back to their homes. USINT Human Rights Officer visited Damas spokesperson Laura Pollan this afternoon in her home. He observed bruises on her body that Pollan said were inflicted when police roughly grabbed her. Pollan stated that with much being said about Raul Castro promoting change, nothing has changed in terms of repression against her organization and there have been no improvements in the condition of the political prisoners. End summary.

¶2. (C) USINT Human Rights Officer visited Laura Pollan, spokesperson for Damas de Blanco, this afternoon in her home to discuss this morning's forceful dispersal by police of a Damas protest in Havana's Plaza de la Revolucion. Pollan had participated in the morning's protest; she was joined in her home by another Damas protester, Berta de los Angeles Soler Hernandez. Pollan told Pol off that the organization had been planning a demonstration in the Square - home to numerous government ministries - for some time. (Pollan had been hinting for weeks about a planned action in the highly-symbolic Revolution Square.) The last time the Damas held a protest in that location was in October of 2004, when they staged a 41 hour vigil. Pollan stated that the organization has recently filed several petitions with the Ministry of the Interior and the Council of State demanding the unconditional release of the political prisoners to which the government has not responded. The Damas felt that it was time to hold a public protest in a high visibility location and chose early Monday morning as a time when state security would not expect such an action.

¶3. (SBU) According to Pollan at 6:30 AM on April 21, ten

members of the organization sat in a circle in a park just off Revolution Square. The ten participants were: Laura Pollan de Toledo, wife of political prisoner Hector Maseda; Berta de los Angeles Soler Hernandez, wife of Angel Moya; Dolia Leal Francisco, wife of Nelson Aguiar; Noelia Pedraza Jimenez, wife of Ariel Sigler; Alejandrina Garcia de la Riva, wife of Diosdado Marrero; Tania Morejon from Matanzas; Barbara Jimenez Apoyo, mother of Noelia; Maria del Carmen; Juana Gomez and a person named Olga whose last name Pollan did not know. The last three were acquaintances of Noelia from the city of Santa Clara and are supporters of the organization rather than members.

¶14. (C) The Damas sat quietly for nearly three hours; they had agreed not to hold any placards or make speeches or chant slogans. At about 9:15 AM a Colonel Samper (the regular "senior watcher" of the Damas, who know him well) from the Ministry of the Interior ordered them to disperse. The Damas refused. Pollan and Soler told HR Officer that 20 uniformed female police officers surrounded the group. At the same time, about sixty workers from the nearby National Library, Ministry of Communications and the Bus Terminal confronted the Damas shouting insults such as "worms," "terrorists," and "mercenaries." Pollan said that large numbers of plainclothes state security agents were on scene and that the workers had obviously been organized by them.

¶15. (C) Initially, two female officers were assigned to lift each protester off the ground. The Damas sat with locked arms shouting "liberty". Pollan said that most of the protesters were bruised from being grabbed and otherwise manhandled. She showed several circular bruises on her shoulders, forearms and fingers that resulted from these actions. Soler said that she had pain in her arms and shoulders. Four female police officers were engaged in lifting each person off the ground. In the cases of Soler and Pedraza, the police were still not able to remove them and had to enlist the help of male police officers. All of the protesters were pushed into buses and driven to their homes. The Damas had alerted the press in advance of the protest and the incident was witnessed and photographed by several members of Havana's international press corps. To date no charges have been brought as the result of the incident.

¶16. (C) Pollan stressed that at a time when the international press is reporting that the government of Raul Castro is promoting change, the Damas wanted to show that the situation of the political prisoners is dire. Many of their political prisoner relatives are severely ill and do not receive adequate medical care. Pollan said that when governments talk of making accommodations with Raul's government, they should not forget the people in prison unjustly. She said that the police actions show that the government still exerts repression against peaceful protesters.

¶17. (C) Comment: The actions of the GOC in repressing a quiet and peaceful protest is an indication of the limitations of the much publicized reforms of Raul Castro. Pollan urged USINT to place the news of this incident on its electronic billboard (which we will) and would appreciate any signs of support from the US government (we urge Washington to consider making a statement).

PARMLY